

Erotic Romance

A close-up photograph of a man's chest and neck. He is wearing a light-colored plaid shirt that is open at the collar. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue sky. The title 'Rough & Ready' is superimposed over the center of the image in a stylized, orange, 3D font.

# *Rough & Ready*

Wendi Darlin

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**BookStrand**

# **ROUGH AND READY**

**Wendi Darlin**

**INTERRACIAL EROTIC ROMANCE**

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**ROUGH AND READY**

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# **DEDICATION**

As always, thank you to my family and friends. I love you all.

A special thank you to Lara Santiago who turned me on to a fabulous publisher, and has gone out of her way to show me the ropes.

# ROUGH AND READY

**Wendi Darlin**  
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## Chapter 1

A secret can't keep a man. Eventually, the man's got to break free. Hollis McAllister kicked the end of a burning log and drew his boot away from the campfire. The saddle at his back almost made for a comfortable seat. As comfortable as it would get for a while. Not nearly as inviting as the bed he'd left, or Taima Everhart, the warm woman that bed had belonged to. One day he would have to live his own life instead of somebody else's. Maybe one day soon.

All he could do now was ride out this mess. Once everything got sorted out, he'd have to find a way to bring his two worlds together. Choosing one over the other wasn't an option anymore. His body hummed with the memory of soft flesh sliding against his, herbal scents filling his nose, and eyes as black as midnight that laid her soul bare for him. He had always known who he was, but now he knew where he belonged.

Unfortunately, staying around had never been one of his strong points.

Wood shavings lay on the sparse grass between his spread knees, and the birch in his hands had started to take shape. Flames crackled and spat as they lapped dry leaves and sappy firewood. He hadn't set out to make a pretty fire, just something to keep his ass warm. In the morning, he'd worry about cutting down on the smoke, for his coffee's sake. That is, *if* he made it through the night alive.

The urge to look over his shoulder was about to get the better of him. But he wasn't ready for the woman crouching in the trees to know he knew

she was there. She had kept herself hidden pretty well, staying just far enough beyond the tree line that he never caught more than a shadow of movement.

He was surprised the warmth of the fire hadn't drawn her out yet. The cold wind cut like a knife across the back of his neck and made his fingers sluggish against the branch he'd been whittling since dinner. Maybe the trees blocked some of the wind.

A thick shaving of pale wood fell to the ground between his thighs, and a line of blood leapt from the cut along his finger. He bit back the oath that jumped to his throat. He wasn't about to invite her to join him. A man with secrets has to know when to keep them. If he can't, the wrong people die.

The blood on his finger didn't bring her out of the woods, and neither did another hour of increasing cold. She was more stubborn than a woman had a right to be, and he would sure as hell like to get some sleep before sunup. Keeping his back to her was foolhardy enough. He wasn't about to close his eyes. The woman had a knife. And he'd bet his left nut she knew how to use it. If she had a gun, he'd be dead by now.

A smarter man wouldn't get turned on by that.

He shifted his ass to give his dick some breathing room. If Taima didn't make him harder than a whorehouse, he wouldn't have put up with her trailing him this long. There was no telling what she was conjuring in that wicked mind of hers, or how long it would be before somebody more dangerous picked up her trail.

Since they'd hit the stream bank, she hadn't strayed too far from the wood line, barely hidden by the scrub brush that grew amongst the aspens. If he had an ounce of luck left in him, she hadn't been able to find enough herbs or roots to cause any lasting harm, and she'd taken care to cover her tracks.

A shiver crept up the back of his neck. Hollis gripped the pocketknife tighter in his hand and continued to stroke the wood, careful not to give any indication he knew she had left the cover of the trees. Old Mabry danced, his hooves tamping the grass. The full moon shone down, and countless stars pricked the blue-black sky.

The hair on Hollis' forearms stood on end. Taima gave off more current than a cattle prod. He figured she was still a good four paces back, moving without a whisper.

“Bout time you quit hiding.” He didn’t turn around, but in his mind, she stopped in her tracks, surprised.

An arm circled his neck and jerked him back. An elbow pressed his sternum, and in the corner of his eye a steel blade flashed in the moonlight. His words hadn’t stalled her, and she had been closer than he thought. He should’ve expected as much.

His Adam’s apple moved over the smooth crook of her arm. Now wasn’t the time to fight back. She was stronger than he had given her credit for, and smelled like she’d rolled in a patch of lavender. A curtain of straight black hair grazed the side of his face and spilled onto his chest.

“Did you think you were gonna run off that easy? That I couldn’t find you?” Her breath was hot on his ear, and every word was seeped in raw rage. She jerked her arm tighter around his neck, cutting off his windpipe.

Hollis tossed his own knife to the ground and grabbed her wrist hard enough to force her hand open. Her weapon fell from her grasp and she swore.

He flung her forward, over his shoulder. And held her when she landed squarely in his lap. Fire shot out of her black eyes, and the moon bounced off the brown skin stretched across her high cheekbones.

“You’re not on the reservation anymore. Pulling a knife on a man will land you in jail. Or in the grave.”

“That’s obviously a chance I’m willing to take.” Taima jerked her wrist free and struggled to get up.

He held her fast. With one arm around her waist, he caught her head in his hand and gripped the thick mass of silky hair. With an almost gentle tug, he pulled her head back. Her nostrils flared. Her hot breath fanned across his face, and a wild desperate look filled her eyes. She might want to kill him, but she’d be just as willing to fuck him first.

“You like playing rough, don’t you?” He dipped his head to nip at one of the nipples straining against her thin flannel shirt.

She let out a yelp, but arched her back, begging for more.

“It’s too bad you don’t like me anymore.” Hollis lifted her off him and deposited her onto the ground. He clamped her wrists in his hands and stretched himself above her. Her chest rose and fell in an exaggerated rhythm. And his dick put up a fight against his worn out Levi’s.

"I hate you." She groaned. The pulse in her neck pounded and her tongue darted out to wet her full rosy lips. He bent for her neck, and she turned her head giving him access. His hat tipped and fell off his head, landing on the ground beside them.

"I told you I didn't do it." He moved to taste her chest. "You believe me or you would've tried harder to kill me." His mouth moved along her open neckline and his nose nudged the flannel aside enough to expose a soft pillow of light cinnamon flesh. No bra to hide the dark brown areola, puckered and covered with goose bumps. Another nudge against her shirt and a rigid nipple sprang free.

Hollis wasted no time sucking her needy peak into his mouth. With every rake of his tongue her breath came harder, and her body squirmed. He'd be willing to bet she was slicker than a mud trail. And she was a hell of a lot more fun to roll around in.

"Couldn't stand to see me go, could ya?" He pulled her hands together and freed one of his own.

"I came after my horse." She wasn't about to give him anything more than he deserved. He could count on that.

Hollis chuckled to himself. He could feel her energy, pent up and squirming beneath him, anger that would turn to passion in a heartbeat. "I just borrowed Old Mabry. And you know it." He blew a warm breath over her nipple. "I don't think it was the horse you came after. And until you tell me I'm innocent, you ain't getting him or me."

\* \* \* \*

Taima clenched her hands into fists and fought to control the sensations ripping through every last muscle she had. Damn the crooked son-of-a-bitch! He lifted his mouth from her breast, baring the heated nipple to the cold wind. The puckered skin drew tight. A sharp ache rolled through her belly and trickled down the inside of her thigh. She arched toward him, offering herself again.

Hollis lightly brushed the sharp stubble of his cheek over her sensitive skin, raking the responsive nerves and sending a tremor through her clit. Taima bit down and threw a leg over his narrow hip.



He knew how to play her. He could wrench out every last note until she sang like a bird. “Again,” she begged. Trying not to love him was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Hating him was impossible.

“Tell me I’m innocent.” His pale blue eyes settled on hers, a challenge written clearly in his gaze.

“Innocent my ass!”

“You run after criminals?”

“I run down horse thieves.”

He shook his head, looking every bit the cocky rough rider she had fallen for. “I left Mason as collateral.”

“You left Mason to throw those cops off your trail. They headed for the bus station just like you wanted them to.” She kicked the heel of her boot into his thigh. “You shouldn’t have expected me to be that stupid.”

“I didn’t. I expected you to send them after me.”

“Liar.” She gasped as he worked the button of her jeans free. “You thought I’d be so blind in love, I’d stay at home crying over your sorry ass.”

He laughed. “I never figured you’d cry.” His grip on her wrists loosened as he tugged her zipper down.

Taima took advantage of his momentary lapse and yanked her arms free. His knee between her thighs kept her from rolling out of his reach, but he didn’t try to capture her again. She pulled herself to her elbows and scooted out from beneath him. Without his hands on her, she could think clearly. She could remember exactly why killing him crossed her mind in the first place.

“I didn’t cry.” She rubbed her hands down the front of her jeans, but didn’t bother zipping them. “Now either tell me the truth or a lie worth believing because every ounce of common sense I have is telling me to forget about the sex and give the cops everything they need to lock you up.”

“What can you give them?”

She clamped her jaw down tight. He was too fucking smooth. She didn’t have anything but a head full of suspicions, and her gut wasn’t willing to believe one of them. “Roy and Jay Dean Ingram aren’t the kind of company an honest man keeps.”

She’d seen him huddled with the two lowlifes more than once, coming in from the same places they’d been. Driving them when they were too wasted to drive themselves. They had even been at the bar the night she met

him. The Ingram boys had been looking for gullible, lonely women to give them a reason to hang around the reservation. They had found what they were looking for and so had Hollis McAllister.

“You used me.” Her stomach rolled, and for a second she thought she’d be sick. “You needed me to stick around the reservation. And what a perfect cover I was. Who’d expect the head of the rehab clinic to be sleeping with a drug dealer?”

“I’m not a drug dealer.”

“Manufacturer?” She raised an eyebrow, daring him to lie again.

“Hell no.”

“I’m supposed to fucking believe you?”

“You already do.” He snagged the open waistband of her jeans with two fingers and tugged.

Taima shook her head and squeezed her hands into fists. If he were bringing more drugs onto the reservation, poisoning the minds of her tribe, turning the next generation into a bunch of mindless, powerless...ugh...fury and sadness twisted her gut and sat like a buffalo on her heart.

“So help me, if you’re lying...” She leveled her gaze with his so there would be no mistaking the truth of her words. “I’ll kill you before the cops ever catch up with you.”

“You got a deal.” His blue eyes sparkled with firelight, a fitting home for the devil himself.

“I know how to get the truth out you.” She scrambled to her feet and dug into the front pocket of her jeans. She held her arm out to him and slowly uncurled her fingers. In her palm lay the truth, waiting for him to take it. Waiting for him to prove the kind of man he was.

\* \* \* \*

Hollis stared at her offering and almost laughed. If he hadn’t known better, he would have thought the gnarled brown button in her hand was a dried mushroom. He lifted the peyote between two fingers and tossed it into the fire.

“What the...”

Before she could finish, he had her wrist in one hand and her hip in the other. “We don’t need that. Or any other serum. I gave you my word.” Her

dark eyes searched his. He could almost read every doubt that crossed her mind as she stared down at him, trembling in the cold air.

He didn't have to ask where she'd gotten the peyote. Her pantry was stocked with every herb, rock, and feather known to Native medicine. What surprised him was that she had taken the time to grab it before she came after him.

She hadn't come to kill him. She came for the truth. And he couldn't give her that. Not all of it, anyway. Not yet.

He lifted the bottom of her shirt and pressed his mouth to her stomach, hoping she would trust in the one thing between them that was fully on the table. Her skin was silk smooth against his tongue and she tasted like vanilla bean, sweet with just enough bite to linger in his mouth.

Her hands combed through his hair and soft moans filled the sky above him as he moved lower into the open fly of her jeans. His lips brushed the short black curls of her mound and his nose caught the intoxicating scent of her arousal.

He dragged her jeans down her hips, catching the thin cotton bands of her panties and baring her to him. His thumbs traced the soft outer lips and spread them, revealing the slick red heat of her pussy. A groan caught in his lungs and rolled up his throat, only to be muffled as he feasted on her.

She pulled the hair caught in her hands, held his head close, and mumbled orders that tripped over one another before he could even begin to follow them. He gripped the back of her thighs and nudged higher. The ridge of her clit skimmed his nose and brushed his upper lip before he captured it gently in his teeth.

She jerked his hair hard and stumbled in her attempt to move closer to his mouth. He sucked the sensitive trigger between his lips and massaged it with his tongue, suckling like a starved animal. She was making enough noise to let every sheriff in Arizona know exactly where they were. Her voice rose and her thighs trembled. She ground her hips into his face and fought to pull him closer. God, she liked it rough.

The taste of her. The sound of her cries. The soft flesh of her thighs molded around his fingers. Everything. Every scent. Every sound. Every slick, soft, heated part of her filled him with one driving need.

His dick sought the waistband of his jeans like a seed sprout seeking the sun. He kept his mouth buried in her, but let go of her legs long enough to

work his pants open and yank them down to his knees. His cock surged forward, heavy as lead, eager and throbbing.

He jerked Taima's jeans to her ankles and guided her to the saddle on the ground. She sank to her knees and bent over. Her stomach pressed into the curved leather seat of the saddle, and her hands braced the ground.

He swallowed hard and spread his hands over the full curves of her ass, propped up and waiting for him.

"You weren't supposed to follow me," he growled, then smacked one round cheek with the flat of his palm. She gasped and arched higher. The sting of his hand shot straight to his dick, and the big boy jumped, ready to get in on the action.

She looked over her shoulder and spread her knees as far as the jeans would let her. "Men don't run unless something's about to catch up to them." She swayed from side to side, her hips beckoning him.

He bent his body over hers and positioned himself. His cock bobbed against her, coating itself in her juices. He pushed just the head inside. And bit his bottom lip to hold on.

Her breath caught, but she stared at him hard. The desire in her eyes waned long enough to let him know he still had some explaining to do. "What's catching up to you, Hollis McAllister?"

In one thrust, he was buried in her, grunting answers he could give her. Driving hard the way she liked it. Giving her everything he was free to give. Doing everything he could to erase the worry from her mind and connect with the woman he didn't want to lose.

He leaned over her, pressing his teeth against her shoulder as he fought the urge to bite down. The thin flannel of her shirt rubbed against his teeth, and his hips sank into the soft flesh of her ass as her body rocked back to his. His neck was drawn taut, every muscle screaming with tension as he fought to hold on. He wasn't ready to stop, not ready to leave the heat of her body. His ears were filled with the rush of blood coursing through his veins and her panting breath and low moans.

"Harder!" She choked out the word as he stroked deep into her.

"God damnit," he growled, pulling out to plunge in again. The woman could drive him mad. It was near impossible to pump the way she demanded and hold out long enough to satisfy her first. From the second he entered her tight wet hole, he was ready to explode. She could suck everything out of

him faster than a man wanting to hold onto any amount of respect could allow.

He reached around the front of her thigh and slid his arm into the bend of leg. His fingers found the swollen pillows of her pussy and moved higher searching for her clit. He squeezed the tense little nub between his knuckles and slid along the outside of it. Her moans turned to cries, her panting breath to gasps. She pushed back hard against his cock and screamed as hot muscles contracted around him, squeezing and rolling, milking him like some freakin' Holstein.

Heat pooled in his stomach and exploded through him. His balls clenched, and his dick stretched in a final swell as a surge of cum rushed through it and poured into her. With any other woman who could make him feel this way, Hollis would've muttered honeyed words and promised her the world. But no other woman had ever lit his soul the way Taima did, and she didn't want to hear sappy notions, no matter how true they were. His weakened arms shook with the effort of holding himself off her. He muttered a swear and dragged cold air into his lungs, praying he wouldn't collapse and trap her beneath him.

\* \* \* \*

Taima pushed back against Hollis' hips. Her thighs trembled, and her nipples danced against the coarse blades of grass beneath her. His shudders rumbled through her, and his breath was heavy on her ear.

"What happens when they catch you?" The fear that had gripped her spilled out on the words.

He slid out of her and yanked his jeans up his hips. "I'm not hiding from the cops." Before Taima could straighten her own clothes, he pulled her into his lap and covered her mouth with his. She met his lips with every bit of hunger and fear that welled inside her, but he grabbed her chin in his broad hand and held her face inches from his. "You've got to head back. And don't let anybody know where you've been."

"Not unless you come with me." The cool air settled over her bare thighs and the heat of Hollis' hand spread through her back. That's the way it always was with him. Hot and cold. Either they were fucking or fighting,

and she never knew enough about him to know if she even had a right to be mad. "I'm not going back without you."

"I'll be along soon enough." He kneaded the inside of her thigh. "And when I get back, I'm gonna love you three ways you don't want me to."

"How's that?"

"Soft. Slow. All night." He skipped open kisses down her neck. His knuckles brushed lazy circles up her thigh.

"Don't get romantic on me, cowboy. I'm not giving my heart to you." Even as she spoke, a slow burn trickled through her chest, and her tongue swelled with need to slide against his.

"You give me everything else." In one motion, his hand was at the juncture of her legs. His finger slid inside her, sending her head back and her arms around him.

She arched her hips to meet his probing hand. Old Mabry snorted and tapped his hooves in the grass. Hollis rolled her to the ground. "Stay down!" he growled in her ear. His arm shot toward the saddle, and when he drew his hand back, a sleek black handgun was seated firmly in his grip.

Taima wriggled her jeans up her hips and fastened them before rolling onto her stomach. Instinctively, she fumbled for the knife she'd dropped earlier. It took a minute to catch the shadowed movement near the edge of the woods.

Hollis grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her toward him. She edged closer, moving to put the saddle between herself and whoever was skulking closer. It wasn't much of a barrier, but the only better one was the stream bank several feet behind her.

Hollis jerked his thumb in the direction of the water. She tightened her grip on the knife and dug the toes of her boots into the ground. He braced his wrist on the seat of the saddle and took aim. The silhouette of the gun he held was almost invisible in the darkness. The campfire crackled and Old Mabry snorted.

Taima kept her eyes trained on the shadowy figure moving toward them. Her breath burned in her lungs. Her heart pounded in her chest. She crept back slowly, not wanting to leave Hollis alone, but she had no doubt he could handle whoever had come after him. Hollis McAllister was built like a six foot five inch brick wall. And he had a gun.

Without warning, a man rushed them from the side. A boot landed a solid kick against Hollis' ribs. He leveled the gun and fired. But a second kick sent the firearm flying and the bullet missed its mark. Old Mabry reared and whinnied in protest.

Taima rose to her knees, knife in hand. Hollis slung a fist into the man who had relieved him of his gun. The two of them hit the ground hard. Grunts and the sharp connection of flesh against flesh and bone against bone erupted between the tangled men. Somewhere in the melee another shot fired. Taima's heart stalled. Hollis wasn't the only one who had brought a loaded weapon.

"Hollis!" The cold barrel that pressed against her temple cut off her cry.

"Get up, bitch."

Taima didn't have to turn around to know whose gun she was at the end of. Jay Dean Ingram grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet. The hard barrel of his pistol carved a path down her face, over the ridge of her jawbone and rammed into the soft skin beneath her chin.

She hid her knife beneath her shirttails and slowly slid the cold blade between the warm skin of her hip and her jeans. A shiver shot up her spine and another smack of flesh against flesh came when Hollis' fist connected with the face of the man he fought. The shadowy figure slumped next to Hollis was easy to recognize now. Roy Ingram. Jay Dean Ingram didn't take a piss without his brother there to hold his dick for him.

Hollis rose to his full height, taking his gaze off Jay Dean just long enough to rake a quick glance over Taima. "You've put your hands on the wrong woman, Ingram."

Taima's head jerked skyward as Jay Dean gave his gun a shove. She swallowed against the pain and growled. "If you don't kill me now, you'll wish you did."

"He ain't stupid enough to hurt you, darlin'."

Jay Dean spat a stream of tobacco juice to the ground. "I got orders to bring you in alive, Hollis. And to do whatever I want with anybody that gets in the way." He pushed his hips into Taima's back and lowered his mouth to her ear. "What d' you think about that, pretty lady?"

She sent her elbow back with enough force to knock the wind out of him, but Jay Dean's grip on her other arm only tightened. He sucked in air and whipped his gun against the side of her head. The pain ripped through

her, but before she could react, her body swayed and her legs bent as if there weren't a bone in them. The ground rose up to meet her, and her vision went from gray to black.



## Chapter 2

Hollis pressed the handkerchief he'd soaked in the icy stream to the swollen cut on Taima's head. A faint line creased her forehead, and she squirmed in his arms.

"That's a girl. Wake up for me."

Her bottom lip moved, but no sound escaped.

Jay Dean Ingram lay where he'd fallen, and his gun was shoved into the back of Hollis' jeans. The handle pressed into Hollis' spine. Both the Ingram boys would be coming around before long, and he'd have to deal with them one way or another. There wasn't any point trying to outrun them. They didn't have the wits to follow Taima or to find him on their own. They'd been sent after him. Marques Santiago probably had a dozen more buffoons already on their way who were just as expendable.

Roy and Jay Dean were easy enough to handle. The smart thing would be to get Taima out of harm's way, and then give them what they wanted. They could lead him straight to the slippery Santiago, and the boys in black could rain down on the drug lord once and for all.

Hollis swabbed the handkerchief over Taima's face and hugged her to him. "Wake up, darlin'. We've got to get you out of here."

Her arm shifted and her hand gripped his shirt. A string of unintelligible sounds passed her lips, and her eyes fluttered open. She reached for his neck and turned toward him, but winced and drew back.

"It's gonna hurt for a while." He held the handkerchief to the knot on her head.

"My leg," she mumbled.

Hollis squinted in the dark and noticed a small dark stain on her jeans, just below her hip. The shape of a knife strained against the denim. He lifted the tail of her blouse. The rounded end of the knife's handle barely peeked

over the waistband of her jeans. He slid the knife she'd pulled on him earlier from her pants and grinned.

"Where's the sheath?"

"Dropped it." The moon reflected in her dark eyes. She was alert enough to reach for the weapon.

He held the knife just beyond her reach. "You threw it down right before you thought about killing me."

"I thought about killing you this morning. I threw it down when I left the woods and got ready to do the job."

Hollis laughed. "Keep this on you. Just in case everything doesn't go like I plan it to." He offered her the knife. "You think the cut's bad?"

She shook her head, then raised the knife to her temple. "Not as bad as the pistol whipping I got." Anger flashed in her narrowed eyes. "I hope you killed that bastard."

"He's worth more alive, but his boss won't think so." He smoothed the hair from her face. "He's not stupid enough to lay another hand on you."

Jay Dean's boot ground against the grass, and a groan rumbled from his throat. He struggled up on his elbow, grunting and swearing. One hand reached for the back of his neck where Hollis' blow had connected and knocked him out cold.

"Check Roy," Hollis ordered.

Jay Dean jumped at the command and twisted his head around to squint in Hollis' direction.

Hollis drew Jay Dean's gun from the back of his waistband and waved it toward a dark lump on the ground. "He still hasn't moved. Your bullet grazed his shoulder. Might want to take better aim next time. You could've killed me."

"I'm gonna kill you." Jay Dean rolled to his knees and spat. "And I ain't going to be nice about it when I do."

Hollis laughed. "Santiago won't let you live that long." He moved Taima off his lap and bent close to her ear. "Don't let them see your knife."

\* \* \* \*

Taima shivered against the cold that had seeped in the second Hollis' arms weren't around her, and she wasn't pressed up against his broad chest.

Her gaze sought him, and as soon as it landed on his back and trailed down to the denim cupping his ass, warmth spread through her chest. There was no excuse in the world for loving Hollis McAllister, but there wasn't enough willpower in a herd of mules to make her stop. Fool heart. She may as well tear it out of her own chest and rip it to pieces. At least she'd save him the trouble, and she'd know when to brace herself for the pain.

She tucked the knife back into her jeans. Hollis' long strides ate the ground quickly, and he was standing over Jay Dean before the jerk could get his feet under him.

"Lead me to Santiago, and I'll keep you and your brother alive." Hollis shoved the gun back into the waist of his jeans while Jay Dean got his footing. Taima searched the grass. There was at least one other gun somewhere, probably two more. Hollis and Jay Dean both had one. And it would only stand to reason that Roy had one of his own. She pushed herself up, and the tip of her finger brushed smooth cool metal. Hollis had left his pistol for her. Roy's weapon was the only one unaccounted for.

Jay Dean bent to pick his hat off the ground, then stood to face Hollis. They were the same height, and neither one of them looked like he had any intention of backing down. "If you killed my brother, you'll meet the devil before you ever see Santiago."

"Thought they were one and the same."

Jay Dean made his way toward Roy. He'd covered half the distance between them when Roy lifted himself onto his elbows. A slew of cuss words shot out of his throat. "I'm gonna fucking kill you, Hollis. Then I'm gonna piss on your dead ass."

Hollis held his ground, the pistol still tucked into the back of his jeans and nothing but cool night air between him and the men who had come after him.

The moonlight hit metal and a glint of silver flashed on the barrel of Roy's gun. He leveled his arm on Hollis. Before he could squeeze off a round, a shot rang out.

The power of the heavy weapon jolted up Taima's arm. Roy cried out once before he slammed back to the ground.

## Chapter 3

Taima's arm trembled. The gun was still aimed at the man she'd shot. Her body was twisted. A fresh knife wound stung her hip, a rush of sound filled her ears, and nausea pooled in the back of her throat.

She was vaguely aware of Hollis as he ran toward her. Through the tears blurring her vision, she could see Jay Dean run toward her in a rage. His shouts were buffered by the roaring hiss in her ears. She stared at the gun extended from her hand. She hadn't made a conscious decision to pick it up. She hadn't given a thought to killing a man.

And as soon as Hollis hit his knees and took her in his arms, she knew why. She wasn't about to fall in love with Hollis McAllister. She'd already fallen. And she wasn't willing to watch his blood pour into the dirt. She would hand over her soul on a platter before she let the man she loved meet the end of a bullet.

Hollis lifted the gun from her hand and pointed it at Jay Dean, stopping the man in his tracks. Taima transferred her grip to Hollis' arm and buried her face in the warm spiced scent of his neck. Her tongue raked over his smooth skin, and she bit down on the thick-corded muscle that led to his rounded shoulder.

He smoothed her hair and pressed his lips to her head. "I'm glad you're on my team," he whispered. "That was a hell of a shot."

She fought to bring his body closer to hers. Her nails scraped the soft flannel of his shirt, and a whimper skipped between her teeth. His arm tightened around her waist, and his fingers burned through the thin cotton of her blouse. His throat moved against her cheek as he swallowed hard. The concealed knife cut into her again, but she didn't care.

"Let me take care of this. Then I'll get you home."

Slowly, she peeled herself off him and took his hand. He pulled her to her feet and walked her closer to the fire. The scent of burnt wood curled through her nose, and the smoke lay heavy in her lungs.

Hollis lowered his weapon and jammed it into the back of his jeans. "See if he's alive," he instructed Jay Dean.

Jay Dean's shoulders shook as he knelt over his brother. A couple of feet from Roy's limp hand, the moon shone on the silver barrel of the gun he'd aimed at Hollis. Hollis made his way over to the men. His pace was steady, but he kept one hand curled around the grip of the pistol at his back. If Jay Dean had any intention of finishing what his brother had started, Hollis was ready for him.

"You better kill me now." Jay Dean's voice was eerily calm. He didn't turn to look at Hollis. His eyes were on his brother's gun, and his body was bent like a cougar ready to pounce. "I ain't about to let you live. Or that bitch, either."

In one motion, Hollis' arm was in front of him, weapon drawn. Legs spread, wrists locked, and the gun aimed dead on its target. He looked more like a cop than a cowboy. "Don't even try it."

Jay Dean's hand clenched, then opened again. His chances were slim, but his loyalty obviously ran deep.

"Tell me where to find Santiago," Hollis said, "and I'll let you take your brother home."

The fire crackled behind Taima, and the adrenaline coursing through her veins escaped in a cold sweat down her spine. What kind of business did Hollis have with Marques Santiago? Santiago was a phantom legend. He had a toady on every corner, or some lowlife claiming to be one. No one had ever seen Santiago in the flesh, but his drugs made their way onto the reservation and into every town from Arizona to Mexico. Santiago was smart enough to stay well hidden. He wouldn't trust his whereabouts to anybody as incompetent as the Ingram boys.

Hollis had only been in town for a few months, but surely he had to understand that much about the way things worked in these parts. He also had to know that men who valued their lives didn't do business with Marques Santiago. If Jay Dean was mixed up with the notorious drug lord, he wouldn't live much longer than his brother had. His body would be found

in a ditch full of bullet holes that the local police would never be able to trace.

Hollis couldn't know how far Santiago's reach had spread. There wasn't a single household on the reservation where every member could be trusted. At least one person in every family had fallen down somewhere, at some time. Santiago had sent one of his local toadies to stand the fallen back on their feet, but he put a price on their souls. Even her own brother had shot himself full enough of Santiago's poison to make a run across the border with a load of the crap.

And just like half the young men on the reservation, if Santiago called on her brother to work for him again, he had no choice. He would serve the devil. Or he would die.

And now Hollis was looking to put himself in the same position. She had to stop him.

## Chapter 4

Jay Dean's emotional struggle played out across his face. Anger-fueled vengeance dominated the need for self-preservation. Hollis held his gun steady and waited for the man to choose his fate. Jay Dean had to know damn well if Hollis didn't kill him, Santiago would. Men didn't get close to Marques Santiago and stay there long enough to get comfortable. Moving through the ranks in Santiago's army happened at lightning speed. Santiago was smart enough not to trust anybody who was criminal enough to work for him. That's why the snake had been so damned hard to catch.

But Hollis was close, closer than anybody else had ever gotten to nailing the crooked bastard. Yesterday's botched bust by the local police department had thrown a wrench in his plans, but Santiago had made up for it. Sending Roy and Jay Dean wasn't the brightest move the snake had ever made.

Unless...

"How long did Santiago give you to find me?"

Even in the darkness it was easy to see the blankness of Jay Dean's stare. He blinked twice, then sat back on his haunches. "There wasn't no time frame."

"Where did he tell you to take me?"

Jay Dean scrubbed his hands through his hair. "I just figured I'd bring you back to town. He's gotta a way of keeping up with where people are."

"Dumb ass." Hollis walked over and picked up Roy's gun. He shoved both barrels down the back of his pants. "I'm surprised we ain't all dead yet."

Jay Dean wagged his head. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Santiago doesn't leave loose ends. You and Roy were nothing but tracking hounds. Somebody who already knows how to find Santiago will pull the trigger, and when he's killed me and you, Santiago will kill him."

“You’re talking out your ass.”

Hollis laughed. “You think you’re the only one willing to kill a man for a buck, or for a month’s worth of blow?” Hollis watched the realization sink in. “Where’d you leave your horse?”

The growl of an engine rose over the crackle of the campfire.

“Get your brother across the stream!”

Before Hollis had a chance to tell her to, Taima grabbed the saddle off the ground and hoisted it over Old Mabry’s back. Hollis helped Jay Dean lift Roy over his shoulders, then ran down the low bank to the stream. He filled his hat and brought back enough water to douse the fire. Low flames leapt from the glowing embers, but they were easily smothered with dirt.

Jay Dean and Taima were halfway across the stream by the time Hollis picked his pocketknife and gun off the ground and started after them. The growl of the engine grew louder. It wouldn’t be long before the driver made it over the low hill.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Old Mabry’s hooves hit dry land, Taima heeled the horse toward the trees. The vegetation was denser on this side of the stream. She wound the horse between brush and close growing tree trunks. The ground had a thick cover of pine needles, and the moon shone in patches through the canopy of branches.

Behind her, Jay Dean’s breath was heavy from the burden of his brother’s dead weight. Hollis kept watch from the rear. It was impossible to look back at Hollis without staring past the man she’d killed. Guilt and the need to be in Hollis’ arms washed over her in a heavy heated wave that pushed goose pimples to the surface of her skin.

Jay Dean kept his head down, but his jaw was set in a scowl. He’d kill her if he had half a chance. If he didn’t come after her tonight, he’d take his opportunity whenever it came. Another chill ripped down her spine. More than one person wanted her dead. Jay Dean was threat enough. But Santiago had more capable thugs than Jay Dean Ingram, thugs that would kill her and anyone else who got in the way.

She urged Old Mabry to quicken his step. The knife in her waistband pushed against her stomach with every rock of the horse’s gait. Santiago



was after Hollis. But Hollis wouldn't die, not on her watch. She glanced back at Roy's lifeless face and swallowed hard as the numbing bubble in her chest expanded. She pressed her palm against the knife and turned back to navigate between the trees. She summoned a memory of Hollis' smooth chest beneath her cheek, his muscular thigh moving against her leg, and his thick cock claiming her again and again. Her clit tingled, and Old Mabry started at the increased pressure from her thighs. Santiago wasn't going to take her man. Not tonight. Not ever.

A low hum drew closer, growing louder even as they made their way deeper into the cover of the trees. The truck that topped the hill just as they disappeared into the woods had slowed to inspect Hollis' campsite and then continued on. But judging from the low growl creeping through the trees, the driver had circled back for another look.

"Where are your horses?" Hollis kept his voice low.

Jay Dean stumbled to a stop, and swung around nearly smacking Roy's boot into a young pine. "Left them the same place you left yours."

Hollis' gaze darted past Jay Dean and landed on Taima. He had stolen her horse, so she had stolen his. Turnabout was fair play.

"I tied Mason to an old deer stand about thirty yards from the tree line."

Hollis winked, and a smile flashed across his face. "That a girl." He turned his attention back to Jay Dean. "Better keep moving. Won't take them long to catch up to us."

Taima threw her leg over the horse and dropped to the ground. "Let Roy ride."

Jay Dean glared at her. There was no misinterpreting the hate in his eyes, but he stepped forward and tossed Roy's body over Old Mabry's back. The horse adjusted to the weight and settled down again.

Taima dropped the reins. Jay Dean reached out like he meant to grab them. Without warning, his palm hit her throat. The blow bruised her windpipe and choked the air from her lungs. His fingers wound around her neck in a vise-like grip. His eyes were black with deadly intent, saliva trailed from the corners of his mouth, and his breath shot from his nose in short heavy bursts.

Hollis grabbed him in a headlock and jammed a gun to his temple. Jay Dean squeezed harder. Spots swam in Taima's vision. Her lungs burned. Jay

Dean Ingram's soul was as black as his eyes. He was going to kill her, unless Hollis killed him first.

Hollis dropped the gun and twisted Jay Dean's head with one swift motion. The crack of his spine rang in Taima's ears like a gunshot. The hold on her neck released, and Jay Dean crumpled to the ground.

Hollis stepped over his body and took her in his arms. Arms that had ended a life in less than a second now formed an impenetrable wall of protection around her. She clung to him. Her fingers sought the tender skin behind his ear, the softest part of his body, the gentlest place she could find. His mouth found hers. His kiss was slow. Soft. Reassuring. She had never wanted Hollis to be anything but rough. But now she needed to be swallowed up in his softer side. The part of his personality that proved she could tame him. She could keep him.

Her heart leapt. She knew better than to put that much hope into a relationship. But tonight, she needed to forget her fears. She needed to trust the man who'd proven he could save her. That he would keep her safe.

Old Mabry's hooves danced on the straw strewn ground. A man's voice boomed through the trees. Santiago's men were close.

Hollis lifted his lips from hers and pulled her off the course they'd been following around a low slope of land. He cut back climbing several feet up the slope before winding down toward the opposite side of the hill. The trees in this area were too dense to travel on horseback, and moonlight didn't pierce the darkness. Neither of them spoke. The damp straw buffered the sound of their footsteps, and only their breath leapt out around them.

Further back, at least three of Santiago's men shouted directions. Branches snapped as they tore through the woods. They'd find the Ingram boys and Old Mabry in a few minutes.

Hollis grabbed her wrist and inclined his head toward a cluster of low shrubs. The area surrounding the shrubs was darker than the rest of the hill. It took a second for Taima's eyes to make out the reason. It was a cave, or some animal's den. Hopefully no one was home.

At the entrance to the cave, Hollis' hand fumbled beneath the hem of her blouse, and he carefully pulled her knife from its hiding spot. He ventured in first, then reached out and motioned for her to follow him. He pulled a smaller shrub from behind the others and used it to brush away the footprints they'd left in the soft dirt surrounding the mouth of the cave.

When he was done, he placed the shrub on top of the others to obscure more of the cave. Santiago's men wouldn't have an easy time finding it. Or them.

Pitch blackness greeted them inside. Hollis' hat scraped the low ceiling. Her boot heels sank into the soft ground. As she felt her way, her fingertips met hard-packed earth and smooth stones, some the size of her palm. After six feet, the cave ended in a solid wall of rock.

Hollis' low swear filled the space around them. She reached for him, her fingers trembling with the overload of adrenaline. Suddenly everything was too black. Nothing was visible to take the attention off her soul. Too many emotions overwhelmed her: guilt, fear, remorse, determination. She knew without a doubt, she would take the same action again to keep Hollis safe. And then her heart yawned with an ache so powerful, her chest and stomach both constricted as if they'd taken a simultaneous blow.

Until that moment, love had been one of two things. A tender affection, heated with desire, or the heart-wrenching pain of its aftermath. Never before had the need of another person consumed her so completely.

"Hollis..." Her voice was desperate. Her fingers curled into the soft flannel of his shirt and clenched so hard, her nails dug into his flesh. His body shifted and he pulled her into him. Crushed against his hard chest, she wrapped her leg around his thigh. Clawing like an animal, she dug at him, searching for a way to drag him into her soul, or to bury herself in him.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Hollis cut off the sound with his mouth over hers. His lips were soft. His kiss was slow. More gentle than it had ever been before. She searched for his tongue with hers and fought to deepen the kiss, but Hollis wouldn't let her take control. He eased her against the wall of stone. A muffled thud sounded at her feet as he dropped the knife to the ground.

His hand cupped her breast through the thin cotton of her blouse. He brushed his thumb across her nipple, turning it hard. His touch traveled on a wave of burning current down her body and exited her pussy on a sharp twang. Her panties were soaked. Her body throbbed with need for him. She rubbed her clit against his hip to relieve the dancing nerves. Two strokes and her womb tightened on the verge of release. She pressed harder, working to penetrate the layers of denim between them.

Hollis grabbed her ass in his broad hand and pushed his hard cock against her. She shivered as the first swell of release rippled through her. It

was everything she could do to hold his tongue in her mouth and not cry out in pleasure. He sensed her impending loss of control and devoured her lips, muffling everything but the sensations roaring through her. His hard shaft ground into her. The second wave of orgasm hit harder, rose from a deeper place and poured through her with the force of a stampede.

Pinned between Hollis and the hard wall of the cave, her senses slowly came back to her. His breath heated her cheek. His skin burned through his shirt. She reached between them and flattened her palm against his raging erection. He was so big, so perfect. He was strong as an ox, and he'd be as gentle as a lamb, when she let him. Or maybe...her tongue dipped to soothe her lip, and the memory of his soft kiss washed over her. Maybe he'd be gentle whether she let him or not. One thing was certain, he had let her set the pace with their relationship, but she knew he had the power to flip everything around anytime he wanted. She couldn't resist Hollis McAllister anymore than she could refuse breath to her lungs.

It was a good thing she didn't dare make a sound. If she had the freedom to say what was racing through her mind, she'd declare her love for him and give him reign to do with her whatever he pleased. He could chain her heart to his and make love to her for days on end. And when he left her, he could take her heart and soul with him. Because he would leave. Men like Hollis didn't soar into town like an eagle and never take off again. But at least her heart and soul would leave with him and forever be where they belonged.

Outside the cave, a man cleared his throat. Hollis eased her to the ground and slipped away. After a step, she couldn't see where he'd gone. Fear pounded the blood through her veins. Instinctively, she sank to the ground and trailed her fingers through the dirt until she found the knife he'd dropped.

## Chapter 5

One miscalculation and they would both be dead. As Hollis moved toward the entrance to the cave, he shifted his cock away from his fly to relieve some of the pressure. He'd never known a woman like Taima before. Never had a lover shattered from nothing but a kiss and a fully-clothed press of her body to his. And he had never needed to sink into a soft body so desperately. She hadn't left a single drop of blood in his brain. He had nearly forgotten that her life was at stake and that it was his job to protect her from somebody with more gun power and motivation than the Ingram brothers.

Marques Santiago wasn't going to stop hunting him until he was dead, and Taima wasn't safe anywhere near him. Not yet. Not until Santiago got what had been coming to him for years.

A foot from the mouth of the cave, Hollis stopped and strained to hear what was going on outside. Branches snapped. Someone moved through the trees only a few yards away. Was it the same man who'd cleared his throat, or had he spotted the cave and signaled for backup? Hollis hated not knowing. The element of surprise was a powerful weapon. He'd rather get the jump on them before they rushed the cave, or worse, sent rounds of random fire inside. He needed to get them as far away from Taima as he could. He eased forward and lowered himself enough to use the brush at the entrance as cover.

A short, stocky man leaned against one of the bigger pines and picked a cigarette out of a sleek silver case. He struck a match on the bottom of his shoe and sucked the cigarette to life while another man approached.

"*Viste algo?*" The taller man hissed his question, then looked around for himself to see if his partner had spotted anything. As soon as his face turned in Hollis' direction, Hollis recognized him. Paco Alvarez, one of Santiago's

most trusted men. He'd survived the usual demotion by death for nearly four years.

Santiago wouldn't send out a senior man without cause. Either Santiago had figured out who Hollis was, or it was time for Paco to lose his place in the Santiago army.

The shorter man stepped away from the tree and lifted his face toward the top of the hill. His gaze swept over the cave without pause, but instantly Hollis knew the identity of both men he was dealing with.

It wasn't likely Santiago was ready to replace both his right hand and his left. Juan Martinez had been promoted just last year, and judging by the flashy suit he wore, he'd gotten used to the lifestyle quickly. The men debated in Spanish whether or not Hollis would have chosen the hill as an unlikely route to throw them off course. Before they came to a conclusion, movement off to their right caught their attention. Both men straightened to their full height. Martinez dropped his cigarette to the ground and hid it beneath his Italian shoe.

Hollis reached behind him and wrapped his fingers around the familiar grip of his pistol. The Ingram brothers' guns remained tucked into his waistband, but he drew his own weapon and brought it around. He leveled the barrel on the chest of the man he'd staked his entire career on finding.

Marques Santiago towered over both of his cronies. His dark hair was styled in an expensive cut, and his jeans had to be a label no cowboy would ever be caught dead in. Dirty money had never been better wasted.

Hollis' muscles twitched. He'd dreamed of moments like this. The opportunity to face down one of the most evil men who had ever lived was the chance of a lifetime. His thighs burned from crouching too long, but he dared not move. He had to get out of the cave before Santiago and his men discovered it. He couldn't take a chance that they'd find Taima.

Alvarez turned around, and Hollis saw the automatic weapon slung across his back. A matching strap was barely visible against the black fabric of Santiago's tailored shirt. Martinez's weapon stood against the tree he'd been leaning on. These men weren't lightly armed, and they'd been trained not to miss a target.

Hollis wished he'd taken the time to tell Taima to stay put. If curiosity got the better of her, they'd both be dead.

“He didn’t go far with the woman.” Santiago’s quick Spanish rang out against the trees. “He’s found somewhere to hide her. Somewhere close by.”

Hollis licked the dryness from his lips and watched as the men visually searched the wooded hill above him. Santiago gave Martinez a sharp look and inclined his head to the left. He sent Alvarez off to the right in the same manner. Not a glimmer of emotion crossed Santiago’s face as he swung his weapon off his shoulder and leveled it at Martinez.

Santiago squeezed off a round. The short man’s knees buckled as the bullets sprayed his back. Alvarez spun around in time to catch a dozen shots in the chest. He fell to the ground staring his boss in the eye.

Hollis lifted his weapon. Santiago turned slowly back toward the entrance of the cave and stared straight at the bush Hollis squatted behind. Hollis pulled the trigger. The shot landed squarely on Santiago’s chest. The drug lord stumbled back and doubled-over, but his weapon never left his hand. He braced his free hand on one knee, staggered to his full height, and quickly moved behind a tree.

Hollis swore. The fucker was wearing a bulletproof vest. Probably two of them.

The tree blocked Santiago’s body, but his weapon was leveled on the entrance to the cave. “Come out now, McAllister, or I’ll unload enough lead to kill you and your girlfriend.”

His English didn’t hold a trace of an accent. Not surprising. For years, the bastard had fooled law enforcement into believing he was operating south of the border. But he had been under their noses the whole time, running the meat of his business out of rural Arizona. He’d hidden well. At best guess he was living a posh life on a Texas ranch or in a California beach house whose deed and tax records had been doctored.

While Feds scurried to find his home, Hollis had infiltrated his place of business. Yesterday’s local bust might have ruined everything he’d worked for if Santiago hadn’t been one step ahead of the law. It was likely Santiago had orchestrated the bust to drive him out. If Hollis had gone to jail, Santiago would have ordered a hit. Killing an agent in police custody would have been a snub at local and Federal authorities. A reminder that he carried out business right under their noses, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Santiago's in-your-face style was his trademark. Bodies of his associates were dumped in ditches, but never without specific placement. They were left where they'd be seen by anyone the big man wanted to send a message to.

Santiago tapped his weapon against the tree. "I'm not a patient man, McAllister."

Hollis rose, but before he made it to his feet, a small hand brushed his lower back. Without a word, Taima slipped one of the pistols from his waistband and huddled back against the side of the cave. God, he'd give anything to know she was nowhere near the psychopath and his automatic weapon.

Hollis stood up and stepped out of the cave.

"Drop the gun. Nice and slow."

Hollis tossed his gun to the ground and put his hands on his hips. Santiago stepped from behind the tree, a glistening white grin spread across his face. "I wanted to get a look at you. It's not often a Fed gets a chance to sleep under one of my roofs."

Before he could catch himself, Hollis frowned. What in the hell did the lowlife mean by that?

Santiago laughed. "Don't tell me you didn't know. Maybe I gave you more credit than I should have."

Hollis sized the man up, and shook his head as what should have been obvious suddenly clicked in his brain. "You're using the rehab clinic as a front."

"Too busy thinking with your dick to figure that out, weren't you?"

Santiago was right. Hollis hadn't gotten around to checking Taima's staff. He'd been too busy chasing after the woman who ran the place. "So you make sure none of your customers ever dry out. Figures. You sorry bastard."

"Supply and demand. It's the way this country works." He waved the gun toward the cave. "Your girlfriend can't do much about the demand, but I can't have you screwing with my supply."

Hollis' fingers twitched as he mentally gauged the distance from his hand to the pistol pressed against his spine.

Santiago wagged his weapon, the barrel aimed at Hollis' chest. "It's been nice meeting you."



A faint thumping sound beat the air. Santiago jerked his face to the sky. Hollis snatched the gun he'd hidden and dove to the ground, squeezing off a round as he went. The bullet pierced Santiago's right shoulder. Realizing he'd underestimated his target, Santiago grabbed his weapon with his left hand. Before he could squeeze the trigger, another shot rang out.

The thumping overhead grew louder as Taima stepped from the cave, a gun braced in both hands. Santiago lay where he'd landed, spread eagle, flat on his back. A gaping wound glared against his forehead.

The thumping in the sky became deafening. The tops of the trees shook and a spotlight bounced off the branches.

## Chapter 6

Taima stared up at the large black helicopter buzzing the treetops, not knowing if it was the cavalry or the rest of Santiago's army. The pilot turned toward the stream, and the deafening roar eased off a few decibels. Hollis caught her by the waist and started back through the woods the way they'd come. His hand bumped her lower back as he guided her along.

"Who is it?" She had to jog to keep up with him.

"DEA."

They skirted Jay Dean's body. Old Mabry had taken off. Either the automatic weapon or the helicopter must have spooked him, but he wasn't skittish enough to have gone too far. Taima struggled out of Hollis' reach and scanned the woods for her horse.

"How do you know it's DEA?" The thumping overhead rose another level.

He swung her around and planted a kiss on her lips. His full mouth spread into a wide smile. "Because you told them where to find us."

"What?" She had to shout. The helicopter was setting down on the bank of the stream, and the whirling rotors thrashed the wind with a deafening roar.

Hollis leaned closer and raised his voice. "You rode Mason out here. I was infiltrated too deep to wear any kind of monitoring device. Mason has a GPS tracker in his saddle."

Taima grabbed his neck and jumped into his arms. She held on for dear life until the rotors slowed and the noise level dipped to a bearable level. The high-pitched whirl of engines replaced the thumping bass of the blades. He was DEA. She hadn't fallen in love with a drug dealer. For once in her life, she had found a man she didn't need to save from himself.

She breathed deep against his throat, pulling in his soft musky scent. This was the smell that made her ache for him before she even opened her

eyes in the morning. The scent he carried after a night of lovemaking. Her stomach stirred with desire, and the sensation tripped along every nerve in her body. Hollis McAllister was a better man than she'd thought he was. Relief poured over her, but then reality slammed home.

She untangled herself from his grasp, and as soon as her feet hit the ground, she put several feet between them. Her heart had never weighed more, and her throat clenched so tight, she could barely form the words. "You did use me."

Before he could answer, shouted voices entered the woods. "Hollis!"

"Over here!" Hollis grabbed her wrist and pulled her with him. "The area's secure!"

Half a dozen men wearing black DEA field jackets poured through the woods toward them. Their guns were drawn but at their sides.

He turned back to her, his face carved into a frown. "Give me a minute to take care of business, then we'll find Old Mabry."

Taima jerked her arm free. "I'll find my own damn horse." Hurt swirled into rage. He wasn't even going to deny it. She was never anything more than a part of his investigation. A cover. A place to bury his dick so he'd fit in and look like he had a reason for sticking around. She'd been fool enough to believe he meant what he said, and cocky enough to think she was the one playing hardball. Score one for Hollis McAllister, or whatever his real name was.

## Chapter 7

Half of Taima's clinic staff had been arrested, and some of the patients were having a hard time without their daily fix. At least the headache that threatened to split her skull took some of the focus off the beating her pride and heart had taken. She hadn't seen Hollis in almost a week.

Before they left the woods, she'd been bounced from one agent to the next, asked so many questions she couldn't remember her own name, then lifted into the back of a jeep for a jarring ride home.

Old Mabry had been quarantined until the evidence was processed. And Hollis had stayed behind to finish his job. There was no telling where Hollis was now, or who he was pretending to be. She didn't expect to hear from him. A man with that many secrets knew how to keep them.

She hung her white coat on a hook in her office and grabbed her purse from a safe beneath her desk. She was so tired, if her house weren't located directly above the clinic, she'd be tempted to curl up on the couch in her office for the night.

She locked her office and waved goodbye to the night nurses gathered around their station. A couple of them giggled, and one snatched up the phone. At the end of the hall, she slipped her key into the locked door that led to the stairwell. At the foot of the stairs, Taima came to a dead stop. On the first step lay a bright gold sunflower. She let her gaze travel the trail of flowers up the stairs. She smiled despite herself and lifted each flower as she climbed. Only one person had a key to her home.

At the top of the stairs, the door that led through her laundry room and into the back of her house stood ajar. Even before she entered, she heard the rush of water and caught the scent of vanilla bath oil.

Her heart froze in fear. Hollis was planning to seduce her. He would put her heart back together just so he could rip it apart again. And she didn't have the strength to stop him. She stood just outside the door, steeling

herself. Part of her wanted to run and throw herself in his arms. Another part wanted to charge in with guns blazing, demanding to know who in the hell he really was and what gave him the right to toy with her.

Before either side could win, Hollis pushed the door open and reached for her. A breath later, she was in his arms, devouring his kiss, melting into the strong hands that moved along her back. His lips massaged hers. His tongue dipped into her mouth claiming what was his.

She couldn't stop the moan that made its way up the back of her throat. Hollis answered with a throaty growl and pulled her harder against him. His hand twisted in the back of her hair while his other arm slid down her back so he could cup her ass. One tug and she was off the floor, her thighs wrapped around his hips, ankles locked across his back. Her high-heeled sandals clattered to the floor. He kissed down her throat to her chest until her blouse kept him from going further.

"I missed you." His pale blue eyes had darkened with desire, and his chest moved in heavy breaths.

Taima trembled. "Don't get romantic on me, cowboy. I'm still pissed at you."

"You can rough me up later. Right now, I intend to keep my promise."

Heat flooded her chest. Taima knew exactly which promise he meant. He was going to make love to her three ways: soft, slow, all night. How was she supposed to protect her heart against that?

He slipped one hand between them and freed the top button of her blouse. His lips brushed the newly exposed skin, and his tongue left a trail of wet heat between her breasts. "Are you ready?"

\* \* \* \*

Hollis set Taima's feet down on the bathroom tile and reached over to turn off the tub. Bringing down a man like Santiago meant marathon debriefing sessions and coordinated efforts to pull in as many of his lackeys as possible before they got news and scattered like cockroaches. He'd wrapped up the paperwork in record time, and it had still taken way too damn long.

Hollis slowly unbuttoned her blouse and pushed the thin fabric off Taima's shoulders. She was dressed for work, not for chasing him down. A

white lace bra set off the dark tone of her skin. Hollis ran his hands down her waist and swallowed the urge to take her hard and fast, the way she'd always begged him to. This was the woman who had saved his life. Twice. She was a fighter. Letting down her guard and exposing her vulnerable side took more courage than brandishing a weapon. But it was high time she found out what it meant to trust somebody. He wasn't going to rush this and he wasn't going to let her keep him at a distance. Tonight, they were going to get as close as two people could get. And he'd prove to her she had nothing to fear.

She reached between her breasts. With a flick of her wrists, the clasp gave way, and she pulled the thin lace back. Her dark nipples were as hard as his dick. Hollis spread one hand across her flat stomach and reached up to fill the other with the weight of her breast. His mouth followed. He fought to control his hunger, licking her slowly, swirling his tongue with as much gentleness as he could maintain.

The scent of vanilla rose off the steam from the bath and from her skin. He caught her nipple between his teeth and looked up to find her eyes begging him. She liked it rough, and he loved to make her scream for more. He bit down just enough to make her dark pupils flare and to force a sharp cry from her throat, then soothed the pain with gentle strokes of his tongue.

Hollis moved over to her other breast while his fingers worked the fly of her jeans. He slid the denim down her thighs and into a puddle around her feet. He followed, dropping to his knees. The skin of her calf was silky beneath his fingertips. Three cuts marked her left thigh. Hollis traced the tender red knife wounds with the back of his finger, then kissed each one before turning his attention to the small patch of lace that covered the sweetest pussy he'd ever tasted. The scent of her arousal filled his nose and spurred a yawning hunger in his gut.

"You've got too many clothes on." She bunched the back of his shirt in her hands and tugged it over his head.

Hollis didn't waste anytime stripping them both bare. He stepped into the tub and gave her hand a gentle tug. Taima followed him in and positioned herself to straddle him.

"Turn around, darlin'." He reclined the length of the tub and pulled her down in his lap with her back braced against his chest. Her skin slid against his, and an exquisite ache surged through his cock. She settled into a

comfortable position, and Hollis traced the ridge of her ear with his tongue. He dipped both hands below the water. One came up to spread soapy bubbles over her breast. The other traveled her inner thigh.

Taima spread her legs, ready for him. The swollen head of his dick bobbed against the soft lips of her pussy. He could shift a few inches and bury himself in her. His neck strained to resist the overwhelming urge.

Taima threw her head back against his shoulder. "Fuck me, Hollis." Her small hand reached beneath the water and wrapped around his cock. She lifted her hips, ready to bring her body down on his. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back. His other hand found the soft knot of her clit and stroked. Her breath caught.

"Hollis..."

"Come for me, baby." He continued to stroke. Her hand squeezed his cock and moved up and down the shaft. Hard. Fast.

"Fuck me, Hollis." Her hips jerked against his lower abdomen. Her soft ass pushed against him.

He had to clamp his jaw to keep from biting her shoulder and shoving himself as far into her as he could go.

"Slow down," he warned her. He moved her clit between his knuckles, running his fingers along the inner lips of her pussy and teasing the quivering hole below.

"Oh, God, Hollis. Please!" Her breath quickened.

He continued to stroke her, giving her pleasure without giving her what she wanted. "Come on, baby. I've got you." He sucked along her cheek, needing to taste her. His cock was ready to explode. His whole body strained with the ache of denial. His arms tightened around her. "Come on, darlin'."

A whimper started low in her throat. Her body shook. Goosebumps covered her skin, and she let out a wail that ended in his name. Hollis held her while she rode the orgasm. He struggled to catch his breath as her wet skin slipped and slid in his grasp.

\* \* \* \*

Taima's vision returned, and she lifted her head to meet Hollis' eyes. They were dark pools of need rimmed in pale blue. His huge cock throbbed

in her hand. She wanted to give him the pleasure he'd given her, but there were things that needed to be cleared up between them.

"I don't even know your name." She hadn't meant for the hurt to be so obvious in her voice. "Who are you?"

"Hollis is my last name. McAllister Hollis. Friends call me Mac." His fingers drew a lazy circle on her breast.

"Why are you here? Isn't it time to move on to your next job?" He couldn't deny he was leaving, or that they were finished now that he didn't need her anymore. So he'd come back to say goodbye. What did he want? A reward for being decent?

"I'm tired of moving on." He twisted her until her body covered him. Her face inches from his. She could feel his breath on her lips. His strong hands held her shoulders, and his jaw locked in determination. "Say you want me."

She rubbed her pussy over the thick ridge of his shaft. Every nerve in her body shot off like a rocket. "I want you." She moved, positioning the head of his cock at her pulsing opening. She eased onto him, stretching around the wide tip of his dick. He gripped harder, not letting her move to take him in. Her body screamed. The tendons of his neck strained with effort and a deep shade of red crept up his chest.

"Tell me you need me." His voice sounded choked, as if he were using every ounce of willpower he possessed to keep from pushing himself into her.

"I don't need anybody."

"You do. You just can't admit it."

"Fuck me, Hollis. Stop playing games."

His jaw twitched. "Is that what you want? Want me to fuck you one more time and never look back?"

"Isn't that what you came here to do?"

He lifted his hips, pushing his cock into her slowly. They both gasped. She all but collapsed against him as the sensations poured through her. She rose slowly. Water sloshed against the side of the tub and lapped against her waist like a warm tongue. Before she could slam down on him again, Hollis braced her hips. He held her immobile in his strong arms. His thighs trembled beneath her and his breath came hard. He was holding back physically, and she had her emotions strapped down tight.



“This isn’t just about sex with us, and you know damn well I never used you. I’m here because it’s where I want to be.” He threw his head back as he pushed into her again. The water moved around them and spilled over to the floor as Hollis controlled the rhythm. He ignored her frantic demands.

She sank her teeth into his shoulder, and he stopped so far inside her, her clit was shoved against his groin. His thumbs clamped hard on her hips. His fingers dug into her ass and held her still.

“You don’t get to be tough tonight, sweetheart.” He sat up and took her lips with his, controlling the kiss with as much restraint as he controlled their lovemaking.

Taima slid her wet hands around his neck and let herself be swept away by the movement of his tongue. Her body softened into his, and he groaned. Water streamed over the side of the tub as they moved together. Her defenses fell as pleasure surged through her. She couldn’t hold back anymore. Her heart was as out of control as her body. In a sweeping wave, every ounce of pleasure known to woman ravaged her.

Hollis responded to her climax. His cock swelled, and with a roar, he released all that he’d been holding back.

There was more water on the floor than in the tub, and she barely had the strength to lift her cheek off his shoulder. “I wish you weren’t finished here.” She barely whispered the words. She’d learned years ago not to lay her heart on the line. And now the realization of how much of herself she had given this man brought the sting of tears to her eyes.

“Darlin’, we’re just getting started.” He tightened his arms around her and planted kisses in her hair. “And I ain’t just talking about tonight.”

**ROUGH AND READY**

**THE END**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Wendi Darlin grew up twenty miles from the nearest stoplight, minutes to the Gulf of Mexico, and steps from an open pasture. Like any native of the South, she can tell you there is nothing more sultry than a Southern setting, whether it's at the beach or on a rural rolling hill. Warm nights, sweet scented air, and a lazy drawl can absolutely melt a girl.

She writes from the home she shares with her husband, son, their two shelties, and Sparky, the little wiener dog. When it is time to take a break, you'll find her near the water, usually not far from a white sand beach.

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